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ABSTRACT

For early childhood educators a cognitive approach to stress therapy is a valuable supplement to other approaches. Early childhood educators, like others, may develop psychological vulnerabilities that contribute to stress and depression. An exaggerated need for approval or an unhealthy demand for perfectionism may contribute to their experience of stress. Reducing stress through a cognitive approach involves defining the problem, reviewing options, and assimilating and accommodating the stressful event. Seemingly simple to make, attempts at stress reduction encounter various difficulties. The narcissism of teachers, their need to feel that they are in control, and their feelings of total responsibility can block efforts to reduce stress. Further, teachers, like others, tend to feel desires strongly, see only how events affect themselves personally, and focus on their own point of view. As Piaget has pointed out, only through a conscious act of will can individuals overcome desire and gain a more inclusive perspective. The shift from desire to will is not automatic, but involves resistance to change as well as possible stress-influenced distortions of reality. Although the process may be difficult, early childhood educators can learn to recognize their own psychological vulnerabilities, observe how they are activated in certain situations, protect themselves from cognitive distortions, and invoke will over desire in stressful situations. (RH)

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A Cognitive Approach to Stress Reduction for Early Childhood Professionals

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A Cognitive Approach to Stress Reduction

for Early Childhood Professionals

Introduction

A cognitive approach to stress therapy is useful, not instead of, but in addition to the already established approaches for relieving stress such as biofeedback, meditation and physical exercise. My own experience has been that these popular approaches are not enough. I am plagued with a "need to know." I am driven to find out what it's all about. How can I make sense of the world and, in this case, out of stress and burn-out? This analytical approach is not uncommon. From a Piagetian perspective we are all making sense of the world all the time -that is the dynamic of cognitive development. Furthermore, physical and emotional acts are intertwined with cognitive acts. They are truly inseparable. Stress and burn-out have been addressed from emotional and physical perspectives. This paper attempts to round out our understandings by presenting a cognitive perspective.

The Problem of Stress

Cognitive Therapy

Cognitive therapy is an approach that says we might have a false reality or understanding of a situation because we do not understand it or perceive it accurately. Dr. David Burns, in his book on cognitive therapy entitled Feeling Good offers a list of psychological vulnerabilities which contribute to stress and depression. They are: an exaggerated need for approval, an unhealthy demand for perfectionism, a feeling of entitlement (I deserve it), feelings of omnipotence,

feelings of achievement as a measure of worth, and a lack of a feeling of autonomy (being a victim). (Burns).

Three Steps

The first step in stress reduction is to define the problem. Decide which of your psychological vulnerabilities are being threatened. Step two is: Review the options. What can you do? Traditionally we know that we can flee or fight. If you choose not to fight because it usually leads to more resistance or aggression then you are left with fleeing. It is possible to flee psychologically or physically. Physically you could leave. I do believe there are possible situations in which this would be your choice. If the situation is chronically destructive to you it makes emotional common sense to leave. More typically, or more often, a psychological fleeing would be more likely. You could just walk away--not get involved. Or you could give in. Submit to other ideas or points of view albeit unwillingly. By doing this, however, you might be sacrificing a bit of integrity and it doesn't feel just right to you. So if fleeing and fighting have not worked for you and, in fact, have caused more stress, there is still another possibility.

In Piagetian theory the basic structure for cognitive development is adaptation, a combination of a double action of assimilation and accommodation. So in our stressful event Step Three is to assimilate and accommodate to the stressful event. We take in what we can and we accommodate (change our mind) as we change our structures given new information. So far it seems rather simple but there is more to explain why stress reduction is so difficult. My experience tells me

that early childhood teachers are especially well suited to adapt to stressful incidents in some ways and not at all well suited in others.

Have you noticed what a strange reaction we get from lay people when we start talking about "our children"? They really are amazed that anyone could see so much. We've learned to notice extraordinary detail in order to understand children better. We then take this minute detailed assessment of the child and individualize his/her program or use it as input for further decisions.

I am suggesting that we make use of this skill of noticing fine details and apply it to our stressful incidents. Noticing fine detail gives us more and more assimilative material. By individualizing we demonstrate our capacity to adapt to the situation.

Hindrances

Now let us look at our particular blockages to stress reduction. Many years ago a prominent educator once said to a group of preschool-teachers, and I was one of them, "You early childhood people are nothing but a bunch of narcissists!" Well, we certainly huffed and puffed about that but I've never forgotten it. I must confess there is a bit of truth in it. There is something narcissistic about teaching. We like to be in charge, we like to be the center of things, we like ourselves and think everyone should like us, too! I submit that it is just this characteristic which causes us so much stress and burnout. In Dr. Burns list of vulnerabilities he refers to omnipotence as a tendency to feel responsible for all that goes on around us. Because we as a group so need to feel in control, we are seriously affected whenever we sense a loss of control. Trends in education

today have put so many pressures and constraints on teachers that they are figuratively screaming across the country, "Stop--we've had enough. We can't be in charge of any more things!" Or another reaction is "They're asking me to do things and then not giving me the authority to do them." This leads to a giant epidemic of stress and burn-out, and, unfortunately, it is hitting some of our best teachers.

What Can We Do?

By understanding the importance of these feelings of self-focusing, need to control and "be responsible for" as part of our style as teachers, we then gain insight into how difficult it is to bring about change in stressful situations--change in ourselves, that is.

Difficult to Change

Deanna Kuhn, in the Harvard Education Review, August 1979, tells us that it is very difficult to give up old structures in cognitive development. That is why some understandings take so long to become internalized. As teachers, we have much evidence of this in our classrooms. Children just don't want to give up their old beliefs. In a paper given to the Menninger Clinic, Piaget explained how we do get some action and change. Why we don't stay in our old position and belief system. He says that there is the same difference between will and desire as there is between pre-operational and concrete operational thinking. At a certain point in a child's development, the child's logic tells her that what she perceives can't be so. The amount of clay or juice must be the same even if it looks different. This is the conquest of logic over perception. The critical abilities

that have developed are conservation and reversibility. In a remarkably similar parallel, Piaget tells us that this same situation exists affectively. Our "desire" is the here and now--our perceptions--our present needs and feelings. The example Piaget uses is one of wanting to go for a walk on a beautiful spring day, leaving his work behind. He says if "desire" wins out, we have not called upon "will." Will is what tells us about the before and after, the consequences of our actions. It is the victory of concept over percept. By invoking will, we include a larger picture than our own. It is a decentering--seeing another position or two positions at the same time. Piaget goes on to explain that change occurs because "the superior tendency (will) carries away the inferior one (desire) by an act of decentration and reversibility.

The Cognitive Affective Struggle

What this means in relation to stressful events is that at such times we do tend to feel our desires most--our psychological vulnerabilities are strong, we focus on our own point of view, how we are affected personally. Only through a conscious act of will can we move off of our own position to see the whole better. It is not automatic. It is a cognitive affective struggle. This struggle is difficult because we don't want to "give up" our old personal desires and points of view. We can't let go. One way to recognize this resistance to change is when we say "Yes, but." That is a clue that one is not ready to change.

Discarding and Distorting to Avoid Change

In the adaptation process it is always possible to discard or

distort new understandings. If the experience is too discrepant--we will discard it, not deal with it. That means we are not ready for assimilation and accommodation. It is also possible to distort in order to avoid change. When we take just what serves our purposes from a situation, ignoring other data, we are distorting and impeding change. Burns calls this device a mental filter and it is one of many cognitive distortions. Other distortions we use under stress are: All or Nothing Thinking, Overgeneralization, Disqualifying the Positive, Jumping to Conclusions, Magnification or Minimization, Emotional Reasoning (I feel that way so it must be so), Should statements, Labeling and Mislabeling and Personalization (it's all my fault).

These cognitive distortions actually distort our perception of reality and seriously affect our ability to cope.

Conclusion

We can learn to recognize our own psychological vulnerabilities and observe how they are activated in certain situations. We also can learn to be aware of how we protect ourselves from seeing a realistic picture of an experience through cognitive distortions and denials. Finally, we can learn to invoke will over desire in stressful situations. We can literally "change our mind" to include perspectives bigger than our own. Understanding a stressful episode is truly a developmental process which calls for identification of variables, seeing relationships and doing mental operations with these relationships. This cognitive approach is a useful supplement to physical and emotional stress reduction techniques.

A COGNITIVE MODEL FOR STRESS THERAPY

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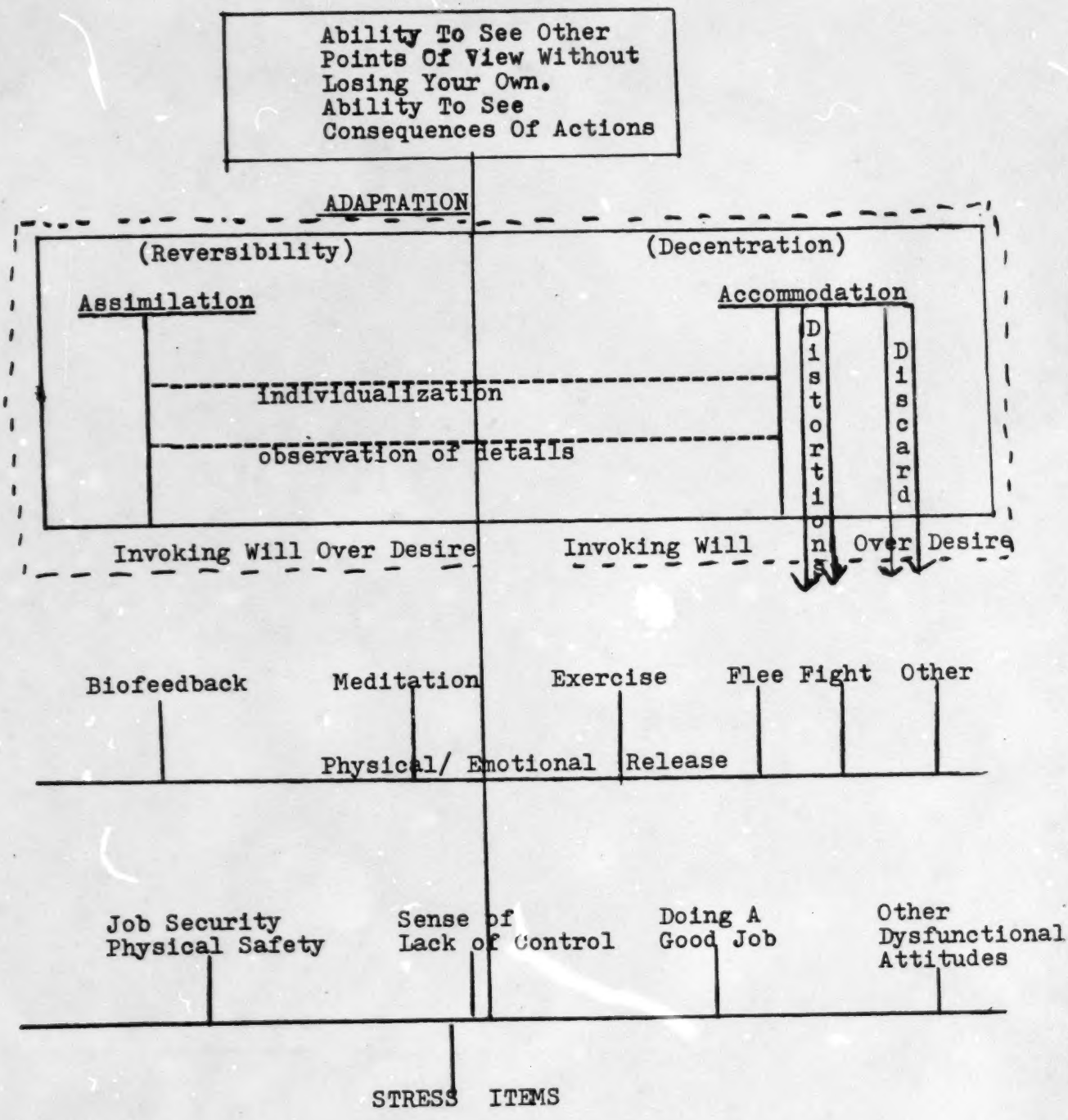

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